



Pick Your Path to Health

The Exercise of Fancy Dancing

By Cathy McCarthy

Anishinaabe - Metis (Non-status)

Last October I experienced one of those 'eureka' moments that might fit more with the likes of Thomas Edison, Alexander Graham Bell, or even Bill Gates than to a middle-aged gray-haired woman - writer-wannabe, like me. It happened in the middle of a round dance in the Leavenworth Penitentiary gym where I had the honor of participating in the Fall Spiritual Gathering of the Native American Inmates. My partner, a respectful and handsome young man was taking me through an arch of human arms when it came to me: This is aerobic exercise, Indian style!

I am glad to report, I managed to stay the course without needing medical attention, and it sure warmed my old muscles and got my heart pumping. More than that, it gave me the opportunity to celebrate and connect with brothers who need to know they are remembered and loved for who they are, no matter what they have done.

This event got me thinking about the various dance styles of the Powwow in a whole different light. Of course I equate Powwow dance styles, first and foremost with the heartbeat of the drum, with the stories they tell, the traditions they embody, and the pride and prayer they inspire in the dancers and in the spectators. But after my round dance experience I will also think about the great workout our dance styles are capable of providing for all ages.

Let's think, for a minute, about dancing as a great way to travel down the path to health. The jingle dance, grass dance, fancy shawl, and men's fancy dancing demand strength, aerobic endurance, coordination, and agility. The complicated steps and body movements are beautifully executed by children, young men and women, and incredibly fit Elders who must be at the peak of physical fitness to make themselves works of art on motion.

Add to this group the snake dance, round dance, and the two-step, and you have aerobic exercises that bring ear-to-ear smiles of enjoyment to every participant. When was the last time you saw that kind of a smile on

the face of someone using a stationary bicycle or a sophisticated rowing machine at the local gym?

Then there is women's traditional dancing. To the untrained eyes, this style may look a little tamer, but it is just as demanding, and just as beneficial for the heart, the joints, and muscles. It takes stamina, control, and coordination of foot, knee, and waist to make the long fringes and bone breastplates on those beautiful buckskin dresses sway and undulate in perfect time to the drumbeat. It takes concentration to create the sense of serenity and style that these dancers project with every step.

Men's traditional dancing and sneak-up demand intense concentration, coordination, dignity, and agility. Men jumping lightly from foot to foot while shaking rattles, extending coup or eagle-claw staffs and bobbing elaborate moose-hair roaches are in fact, doing a total body workout. If you think that this idea is a little far-fetched, try dancing every intertribal at your next Powwow. I am sure you will change your mind.

One of the least expensive and most effective ways to prevent or make a positive impact on conditions like non-insulin diabetes (Type 2), heart disease, and obesity is to exercise in some way at least 3 times a week. It doesn't have to involve special equipment, tailor-made clothes or an expensive membership to a gym. It can be as easy as donning a pair of comfortable shoes, a familiar old sweater, and finding a safe quiet path to walk down. It can be as simple as taking the stairs instead of the elevator, joining in with the children to throw a few hoops in the driveway, or meeting up with some friends to play a little football in a vacant lot. And it can be as enjoyable as participating in the intertribals at local Powwows.

More and more, our communities are organizing themselves to keep fit. We are developing programs in our schools, our community and friendship centers, and in our homes that get us out of the easy chair and into a regular routine of stretching, running, and moving. In turn, this is lowering our blood sugar, blood pressure, and our cholesterol. And it is raising our spirits, our sense of community, and our pride. We are getting our bodies in motion as a result of diabetes prevention programs, healthy Elder programs, school involvement, and because we recognize that we need to do this in order to be healthy.

There is a healthy exercise program out there for everyone and as Native women, we owe it to ourselves, to our families and to our community to be leading the charge down this path.

If our children or husbands are sitting in front of the TV for more than 2 hours a day, they are building a layer of fat that increases their risk for diabetes type 2 and developing a habit that will eventually lead to heart disease. More than this, they are absorbing the worst elements of the dominant culture and not learning the best things about their own. We are the ones that have ultimate control over the on/off switch. And only we can model and guide our children to the dance, to Mother Earth, to the baseball diamond, the soccer field, and the basketball hoop.

And how about you? Feeling too old and stiff to be cutting the grass in the dance circle? Why not start with some body, spirit, and mind stretching exercises? Check out the Tai Chi group at the local community or friendship center. It's a great way to meet people and get your body moving in a good direction at the same time. If you do these exercises on a regular basis, you will be ready for the spring Powwow circuit. The only thing left to do will be to dust off your regalia.

No exercise programs in your community? Why not start one up? Try asking a few of your friends if they want to go for a noon-hour walk. Check out the Yoga or Tai Chi videos from the library. Then invite some friends over to watch and try them out. If this kind of exercise sparks enough interest, you might want to contact a local Yoga or Tai Chi club and explore the possibility of getting someone out to lead you. Talk to your local health care staff, tribal council or community leaders and see if they would be interested in heading up or helping out with setting up community fitness programs.

If you are thinking to yourself that this just can't be done, you may want to take a look at some examples of successful programs in Indian communities. The first step is always the most difficult to take. But in this case, it will be good exercise and well worth the effort.

*Indian author and public speaker, Alexie Sherman has written and produced a movie called "The Business of Fancy Dancing." For more information on this, check out: <http://www.fallsapart.com/fancydancing/> or call Larry at 206-686-1572 to bring it to your community.

Read about communities who have already set up fitness programs:

"Tribe Fighting Diabetes" by Antoinette Rahn, in Canku Ota (Many Paths), Issue 37 June 2, 2001.

http://www.turtletrack.org/Issue01/Co06022001/CO_06022001_Diabetes.htm

"Wisdom Steps: Come Walk with Us"

<http://www.wisdomsteps.org/wisdomsteps.htm>

"Kahnawake Schools Diabetes Prevention Program"

<http://www.ksdpp.org/aboutus.html>

Your local library can help you print out the information on these Internet sites

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